



Bridging Socioeconomic Barriers for Sustainable Citizen Participation in County Development: Highlights from Chuka Municipality, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

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Abstract: *The role of Citizen engagement at the County development level is undisputable in Kenya. The paper examines the intrinsic barriers to sustainable Citizen engagement in county development projects in the lens of Chuka municipality. While several obstacles exist, Citizen Participation has been enhanced. Based on mixed research design a sample of 394 respondents was selected through the use of stratified, proportionate, purposive and simple random sampling methods. Data were collected through interviews, Focus Group and Key Informants Interviews. The paper was anchored on the Ladder of Citizen Participation model by Sherry R. Arnstein in 1969. Although an inferential test showed that there was a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between the participation of citizens and the sustainability of the county development projects with the correlation coefficient of 0.623 and p value of less than 0.01. It was also evident that citizen participation is faced with inherent barriers, that if they are not prevented, they could compromise the positive gains achieved. The study found that the obstacles could only be resolved through collective engagement of all citizens in the municipality. It recommends proactive involvement of the process project owners through genuine consensus and dialogue.*

Keywords: *Municipality, Citizen Engagement, Barriers, County, Development*

1.1 Background of the Study

Socio-economic factors are another complication to citizen engagement. People of low-income households or who have low educational levels tend to find it hard to engage in civic life (Jones et al., 2023; Robinson & Garcia, 2021). The availability of technology is a limiting factor in the modern system of governance and communities with limited access or technology illiteracy frequently struggle to be represented in online consultations and e-participation sites. According to Gomez (2020), with the lower-income populations the obstacles more often mitigate their participation in the decision-making process, including absence of access to internet, the costs of transportation to visit a physical meeting, and a lack of understanding of the bureaucratic procedure.

The cumulative consequences of these barriers to communication and socio-economic barriers are the existence of a participation gap where only some sections of the society normally those who are better educated, better off and urban, tend to participate in the process of governance. This not only negates

inclusivity but also reduces the applicability and success rates of development projects since without wide consultation projects will never address acute needs of the community. Thus, overcoming such communication gaps and socio-economic disparities is critical towards making the engagement of citizens meaningful, equitable, and one that is able to fortify the outcomes of governance (Johnson & Patel, 2020; Smith, 2021).

A significant hindrance to effective participation of the citizen in the administration and development initiatives is the political power (Nguyen & Lee, 2020). In most contexts, political players can manipulate the process of community involvement, promoting their own Hobbies as well as that of their political parties, instead of integrating the opinions of the local communities into the decision-making process (Tan, 2019). Such manipulating could also cause loss of confidence in government institutions as the citizens would become pessimistic on the likelihood that their contributions will make any difference. According to Williams (2021), perceiving that the participation is just a formality or a kind of token approach, citizens are less likely to undertake civic activities that will hinder the overall performance of participatory governance mechanisms. In addition to political manipulation, lack of information pertaining to civic rights and responsibilities is a key limitation to citizen participation (Chen & Wang, 2022). A large number of people are also still ignorant of channels through which they can participate in policy-making or contribute to development projects such as in the form of public forums, community committees and feedback channels. According to survey data presented by White and Brooks (2020), knowledge gaps exist mostly among marginalized populations: women, young people and dwellers of remote regions. Even with the availability of engagement opportunities, people do not have information or directions to make the most out of the opportunity, and the representativeness of voices in the decision-making process will remain low (Lee, 2021).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Besides being estranged in the Kenya Constitution 2010, it gives the community a voice and freedom to identify and select development initiatives that are in-line with their felt needs. It empowers the community to be true owners and managers of transformational projects at the household level. The absence of citizens' engagement denies the people not only the right to control but also an opportunity to spearhead their own destiny.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The paper examines the barriers to sustainable citizen's participation in Chuka Municipality projects

1.4 Literature Review

Promotion of inclusive governance is often prohibited by political interference. To make participation successful, citizens should have access not only to participation platforms but also feel confident that their inputs are to be respected and valued (Nguyen & Lee, 2020). To overcome these obstacles, it is necessary not only to make institutional changes to reinforce resistance to political interference, but also to establish long-term civic education initiatives with the aim of informing citizens about their civic rights, duties, and specific ways to engage (Chen & Wang, 2022; White & Brooks, 2020). In this way, governments are able to build an increasingly transparent, innovative and inclusive method of decision-making which is more representative of the needs and priorities of the community.

In the recent past, people have become aware of the obstacles to citizen action and how it can be overcome to achieve inclusive and effective governance. Having better communication strategies, governments can be sure that all the layers of the society, including the most marginalized and hard-to-

reach groups are informed about the policies, development projects, and participation opportunities (Smith & Mwangi, 2022). Social-economic inequalities should also be addressed since economic constraints and educational disparities usually deny citizens the chance to engage with the government in a substantial way (Jones et al., 2023). This can be done by taking specific steps like offering platforms that are friendly, transportation assistance, or digital literacy initiatives so that citizens may be able to participate and do so on equal terms (Kariuki, 2022). It is also important to alleviate as much as possible political influences that manipulate participatory processes. The larger the citizenry is willing to involve themselves, the more they feel that their contribution will count toward the decision-making process and not used as a means of political mileage (Nguyen & Lee, 2021). Civic education campaigns can be conducted to enhance the vision of the people regarding their rights and duties and enable them to express themselves with knowledge and firmness (Chen et al., 2022).

The combination of these interventions promotes a situation in which engagement of citizens is relevant and effective. Through transparency, inclusivity, and accountability, the government will be in a position to understand the needs and intellectual capacity of their people and ensure that policies and development projects match their actual needs and aspirations (Brown et al., 2023; Johnson, 2021). The bottom-line is that the enhancement of citizen participation is both a democratic principle and a practical approach to the development of sustainable growth and attainment of responsive government to the interest of every citizen (further reading, Fung, 2021; Muriu, 2022).

1.5 Theoretical Framework

To provide a solid foundation for understanding citizen engagement in county development projects, this study was anchored on Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation model, which offered comprehensive insights into the dynamics of citizen participation and the motivational factors behind engagement.

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

The Ladder of Citizen Participation advances by Sherry R. Arnstein in 1969 can still be taken as one of the most fundamental frameworks in interpreting the dynamics of citizen participation in decision making processes (Arnstein, 1969). The ladder gives a systematic process to evaluate the level of involvement and power citizens have towards policies and projects that researchers cause in their neighbourhood. In addition to facilitating an analysis of whether there is citizen engagement or not, the framework provides an opportunity to analyse the quality and depth of such citizen engagement (Smith & Brown, 2022). This is especially relevant when local development project is in question where intervention outcomes can largely be determined by the relevance and success of participation of the community members.

The framework comprises eight rungs divided into three categories namely: non participation, tokenism and citizen power. The rungs correspond to different degrees of citizen leverage, which can be minor, or only nominal, or even complete management. At the bottom of the ladder of the first category, non-participation, is Manipulation. At this stage, there is very superficial or formal participation which aims more at the appeasing or education of the citizens than involving them in decision making per se. Citizens may be given the opportunity to attend a public meeting, advisory board or a workshop, but these occasions can just be means of justifying already established decisions (Arnstein, 1969; Ochieng, 2021).

1.6 Methodology

The research was conducted in Chuka Municipality, located in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya, which lies between latitudes 0°16' and 0°22' South and longitudes 37°45' and 37°55' East. A mixed-methods

research design, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques was extensively employed. The residents of Chuka Municipality who are either directly or indirectly involved in county development projects made up the study's target population. Samples of 384 respondents were selected through Stratified Sampling. Proportionate, purposive sampling was employed in identification and engagement of key informants from county and National government officials. Simple Random Sampling was ideal for traders and household representative. The questionnaire, focus group discussions and key informants' guides were the main data collection instruments. Inferential statistics, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used in analysis of quantitative data. Qualitative data was sorted based on thematic issues as they build up from in-depth interviews with traders in the municipality.

1.7 Study Findings

Barriers to Inclusive Participation in Tharaka Nithi County

The section provides a synthesis of qualitative data on the greatest barriers to the inclusive citizen engagement to county development projects. The responses reveal that barriers are both structural (like distance, cost, and language) and institutional (such as mistrust, tokenism, and poor communication). A total of ten major themes emerged: (1) Language Barriers, (2) Lack of Access to Information, (3) Physical Inaccessibility, (4) Marginalization of Social Groups, (5) Inadequate Civic Education, (6) Governance Gaps and Public Mistrust, (7) Timing and Scheduling Barriers, (8) Exclusion from Decision-Making, (9) Digital Divide, and (10) Social and Political Factors. These perspectives complement the quantitative results and add needed context to the issues that need to be addressed by inclusive governance.

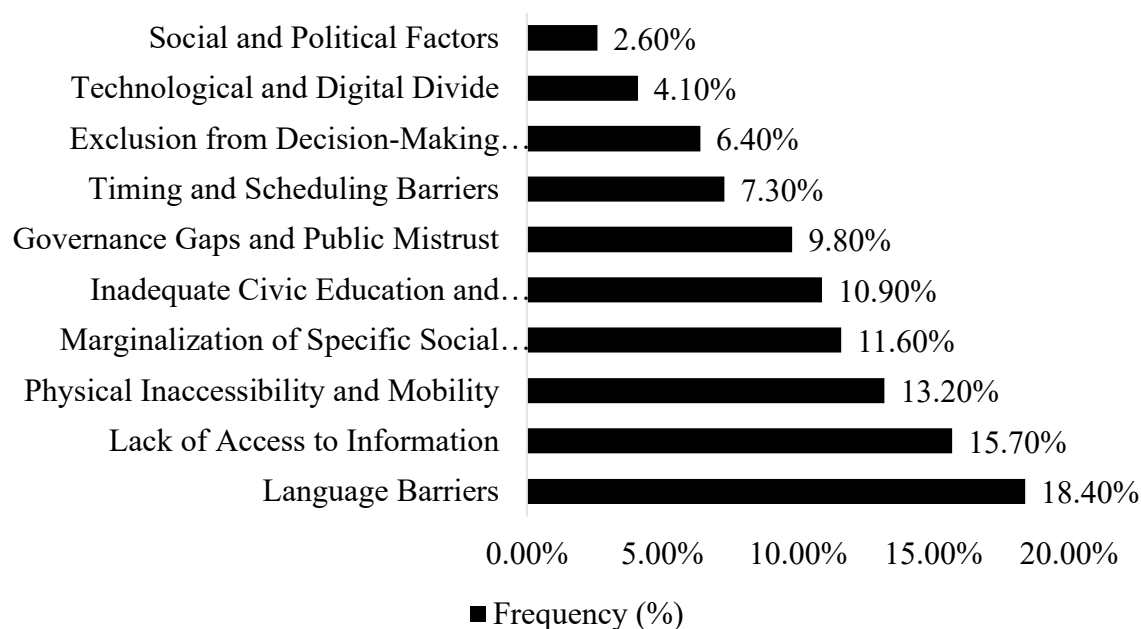


Figure 1: Barriers to Inclusion in Citizen Engagement

Source: Field data, 2025

The most commonly cited barrier to effective citizen participation was language, especially among the elderly residents, persons with disabilities (PWDs) and people with low literacy levels. Although the forums provided to the public were regularly conducted to speak about the planning in a county, the jargon terminologies and English phrases pushed away significant segments of the populace. It was found that in relevant documents and presentations, the local dialects were not being used and the people

found them too difficult to follow or give valuable input in terms of understanding information. Moreover, there was also the absence of interpreters or simplification of materials offered during barazas and by extension during open meetings that further entrenched lack of access.

“Use of English/technical language.”

“Materials not available in local languages.”

“No translations to local dialects.”

These issues point to an underlying problem of poor communication in which the official mechanisms do not correspond to linguistic reality of the local people. In case citizens fail to understand what is being said and what is written, the purpose of participation is abducted. This not only restricts the democracy of civic processes, but this also vitiates transparency and community credibility. It is less likely that the citizens, who feel intimidated by the limit of language they are facing and are not included in it will attend any future meetings or future county program participation. Systemic exclusion brought about by the absence of communication in languages that residents comprehend and the breach of the right to accessible information granted under Article 35 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010). Counties are required to formulate and implement language translation strategies, where use of local dialects is mandatory in public participation forums, and simplification of technical information. Interpreters or facilitators who have knowledge of vernacular languages should be included in barazas and print materials should also be provided to the people in both Kiswahili and dominant local languages. Such would facilitate inclusiveness, increase understanding and the ability of every citizen irrespective of the level of education and origin to fully engage in governance.

Respondents in underserved places were forced to report that they were usually not updated on any upcoming meetings and forums. Some did not have access to dependable internet, television, or radio signals and others were simply ignorant that there could be such platforms. Consolidation of information at county head level or in the urban areas denied large numbers of citizens in rural areas information and even participation of civic activities.

“Lack of awareness.”

“No internet or radio access.”

“Information may be omitted.”

The above statements indicate that there exists a communication void that not only impedes participation, but also increases marginalization. The failure to take steps and make citizens aware of their opportunity to participate makes the needs and views of citizens unaccounted in planning and budgeting. There is a strong form of centralization of information, and many are unable to access it. This brings into perspective the importance of counties to implement multi-platform, local distributions. These are supposed to come in the form of SMS alerts, vernacular radios, church announcements, local barazas, and noticeboards in the trading centers and offices of the chiefs (World Bank, 2022). Formalization of locally based information networks will facilitate fairness and civic participation immediately.

Citizens attributed failure to participate to far distances to venues of the meetings, lack of transport, and disability unfriendly infrastructure among the key barriers. These obstacles especially burdened PWDs, aged residents, and distant wards.

“Long distance to venues.”

“No special accommodations.”

“Elderly cannot travel far.”

Accessibility to the public forums is physically costly, which results in mass exclusion. Traditionally, county participation strategies have not considered the actual mobility constraints faced by a high percentage of the population. Citizen engagement should be brought nearer to people. This involves

devolving meetings to sub-locations, exercising the concept of mobile participation units, and the support of vulnerable groups in terms of transportation or providing access to the venue of these (Van der Walt, et al (2023). Participatory governance will lack the provisions of equity and effectiveness unless the physical access issues are resolved.

Some demographics such as the youth, women, elderly citizens, and disabled population were systematically locked out of engagement processes. Some others representing minority wards such as citizens of lower parts of Magumoni ward shared the same concerns of underrepresentation and inequitable resource focus.

“Youth are ignored.”

“Special needs groups overlooked.”

“Women’s voices not prioritized.”

The patterns unveil deep-rooted social disparities that interfere with meaningful and inclusive governance. Involvement that is not designed can copy the already existing structures and disempower the vulnerable citizens. In Article 10 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010), inclusion and equality in governance are a requirement. To engage the marginalized groups, counties have to impose quotas or carry out specific mobilization campaigns. It could be through conducting focus groups involving women, use of sign language interpreters or conducting barazas in underserved locations (UNDP, 2021).

There were generalized comments by participants indicating little understanding of governance structures, laws on participation of the people and their roles in the development process. Most citizens were not aware of the mechanisms of decision making or what they can contribute.

“People don’t understand their roles.”

“Need civic training.”

“There’s poor knowledge of governance.”

This knowledge deficit leads to poor attendance, token attendance, or passive attendance at the forums. In absence of knowledge, citizens are not able to make any contribution and bring their leaders to book. Participatory governance is based on civic education. Counties need to implement continuous sensitization campaigns, which include training sessions based on the baraza concept, village civic meetings and visual aids that have been simplified to suit different populations. Priority should be given to youth, women organizations and labourers in the informal sectors (Van der Walt, et al. (2023)

A lot of the citizens did not trust their county leaders because they were corrupt, had not fulfilled their promises, and did not remember their past contributions. It was because disappointed in leadership repeatedly, people became disengaged and indifferent.

“Corrupt County officials.”

“Views ignored.”

“MOUs not implemented.”

These reactions indicate a crisis of credibility. Citizens perceive that their contributions are taken but not implemented and the leadership is not transparent and accountable. Rebuilding of trust in the counties can occur through institutionalizing of the system of giving feedback to the counties, citizen oversights, and establishing of anti-corruption strategies. The major features that must be restored are transparency in project implementation and accountability frameworks (Transparency International Kenya, 2022). The participants, particularly the self-employed, traders or farmers complained that timings of meetings were set during peak business hours or at short notices and they were constrained to attend.

“Meetings held during work hours.”

“Too time-consuming.”

“Short notice.”

The economic realities of everyday life are not taken into consideration when poor timing is used and thus set unintended obstacles on the path to participation. Counties ought to create volunteer participation scheduling, and flexible participation schedules that are people friendly. The schedule of meetings such as an evening or weekend, early notifications, and rotating duties will help to avoid side-lining economically and significant citizens. Planning will make participation to be institutionalized (IEA, 2022). People also believed that their suggestions would not be considered or would not form part of the decisions reached even when they attended those meetings and offered their suggestions. There was no observed difference of participation which made one less motivated to participate in other future forums.

“Proposals not adopted.”

“Participation is symbolic.”

“Inputs sidelined.”

Some citizens said they were the neglected ones since even after they participated in the meetings and provided their contributions, many things did not seem to take their ideas and be involved in the final decisions of the government. A visible effect of the participation was not felt, thus decreasing the interest to take part in subsequent forums. The rising numbers of digital tools connections through communication and interactions has consigned citizens who do not have smartphones, dependable electricity, or digital literacy particularly the elderly and people living in rural areas.

“Cannot receive SMS alerts.”

“No access to internet.”

“People without smartphones.”

This gap has widened inequality of access to civic facilities where only digitally connected has been enjoying regular engagement within the processes in the county. Although e-governance is efficient, it would have to be complemented by the old ways that include the public notice-boards, community radio, and face-to-face barazas. A mixed method keeps out all demographics based on the limitation to technology (UN-Habitat, 2020). Ethnic discrimination, political bias, and the involvement of elected leaders were among the key impediments to non-discriminatory participation. Others were made to feel marginalized or unable to express themselves because they could be perceived as having political links.

“Opposition supporters ignored.”

“Minority tribes excluded.”

“Favoritism.”

Such concerns weaken the impartiality and equity that are essential to the involvement of the populations and the sustainable development. Counties should demystify civic processes by using impartial facilitators, applying non-partisan policy, statutes, minimization of discrimination, and developing citizen charters that afford equal rights to participation. This is in line with Article 174 of the Constitution of Kenya which states that governance should be inclusive and accountable.

1.8 Conclusion

The study has found out that the state of citizen engagement in Chuka Municipality is still unsatisfactory and this fact largely contributes to the sustainability of county development projects.

The analysis, however, showed that the main obstacle to meaningful participation lies in the unreliable and ineffective communication channels including regular but papers, delayed suitability of information sharing as well as lack of utilization of new digital platforms. The downside of such shortcomings is that it can reduce chances of communication, feedback, and group problem solving involving the county government and residents;

In order to achieve sustainable development, county government needs to incorporate inclusive, transparent, and interactive communication approaches that would help to disseminate information in time and welcome responses and trust. These methods must also include marginalized groups properly and provide equal representation and a sustained forum of collaboration between the leaders and the citizens.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the study findings the study recommends:

Collective engagement in resolving short and long term internal, economic, administrative, political and civic barriers to ensure there is cohesiveness among the stakeholders. This should be done regularly since differences tend to emerge any time among traders due to competition and envy;

The county administration ought to institutionalize orderly and regular participatory forums at municipal and ward level. This may comprise town hall meetings quarterly, citizen committee at ward level, and community representatives becoming part of project steering committees. Such platforms must create an avenue of positive representation of all groups of people particularly the women, youth, physically challenged persons and marginalized groups in decision-making; and

The county ought to establish several accessible feedbacks like suggestion boxes in the public offices, the toll-free hot lines, short online surveys and public information desks. These processes are supposed to be connected to a formal practice in which the input of citizenry is captured, read, and responded to, therefore, earning trust and accountability.

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